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MOBILITY FOR DEAF-BLIND

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Mobility for the deaf-blind adult is an area that has been overlooked for sometime, although it is one of the most important skills for the deaf-blind individual to learn. Through mobility training, the deaf-blind individual can learn to become independent.

Being independent means that the deaf-blind person becomes a decision-maker in his own life. All too often the deaf-blind person is managed. He is dependent upon others to fulfill his needs. Often he is isolated and bored, just sitting for hours within the confines of his room.

For the first time, through mobility training, the deaf-blind person learns to rely on his own judgment. Now he can go where he wants, when he wants. He does not have to depend on others to take him where he wants to go. He can go by HIMSELF. He is free and independent. Even if we only get the deaf-blind person to walk around the block, we feel that his life has been increased a hundredfold.

At the Helen Keller National Center, we do not teach independent travel, but rather we teach how to travel as independently as possible. This may seem a contradiction to what was previously stated, but it is not. The deaf-blind person will never be able to move about as freely as a hearing-sighted person, or even a hearing-blind person. However, within certain limitations, the deaf-blind person can move about freely and independently.

Due to the dual disabilities of having neither sight or hearing, the limitations that curb the freedom of independent travel for the deaf-blind deal mainly with the safety of the individual when he is traveling.

This is why you will find that most deaf-blind people are what we call route travelers. By route travel we mean that the deaf-blind person will follow the same route everyday, so that he becomes familiar with the route.

He learns where the danger spots are, and where he will need assistance in crossing streets.

The totally deaf-blind person, and many times, the partially sighted deaf person, cannot cross streets by himself. They need help, public assistance from the general public. The need for public assistance is not only seen in crossing streets, but it is seen in all phases of travel and shopping for the deaf-blind individual. It is essential because there are many things that the deaf-blind person needs to know that he cannot get from tactual exploration, such as the color of clothes, and when the next bus comes. These things a hearing-sighted person takes for granted; but they are very important to the deaf-blind person.

This then is the job of the mobility instructor - to teach a deaf-blind person how to travel safely and freely in a hearing-sighted world, so that he will not be limited to where he goes, only in how he goes.

Though the basis of mobility for the deaf-blind is founded in the techniques and skills used with the blind, there are several major differences. However, all of these differences are related directly, or indirectly, to one word - communication - not just communication between the deaf-blind person and others - but communication in its broadest sense - the communication between the deaf-blind person and his environment. The better the deaf-blind person communicates his needs to others and deals with obstacles in his environment, the better an independent traveler he will be.

Mobility for the blind uses as its basis of orientation audiological cues. Mobility for the deaf-blind uses as its basis - tactual cues and the sense of touch. The sense of touch is the most important tool used in mobility for the deaf-blind. This is how the deaf-blind person perceives

the world - through his fingers. It has been said that the world of the deaf-blind is as large as the length of his arms. From the feedback that the deaf-blind person receives from touching and exploring objects, he learns what they are. The knowledge of what and where these objects are located, helps the deaf-blind person orient himself to his surroundings.

This then is the first difference in mobility for the deaf-blind. The need for tactual stimulation; the need to experience the feel of different substances; to know what kind of ground he is walking on; or know what an object is made of.

Before a deaf-blind person can learn to use a cane properly, he needs a solid background in orientation. There is a great need to develop spatial concepts in the deaf-blind person. Spatial relationships, kinesthetic memory, and awareness, are all needed for the deaf-blind person to orient himself to his surroundings. All too often for the adult deaf-blind, these concepts have never been worked on, or have long been forgotten because of disuse.

To find how much the deaf-blind individual knows about his surroundings, we give what we call an environmental checkout. We try to find out how well the person uses his residual vision or hearing; how much he knows of the outside world; what he knows about traffic patterns; and whether he knows that roads run parallel and perpendicular; does he know right from left, and can be follow directions. All of these give us a good picture of how well the person will adjust to traveling.

In addition, we use the environmental checkout to see how well the deaf-blind person uses his whole body as a receiver of information. By

this we mean - can the deaf-blind person pick up vibrations, not just from his ears, but from his whole body. Can he feel when a train is coming or if there is traffic, and can he tell from which direction these vibrations are coming.

The sense of smell is checked out to see if the deaf-blind person can differentiate between distinct smells; such as, that of a bakery, a garage or a fish store.

Once the individual goes through the initial checkout, he/she then starts to learn cane techniques. How successfully the individual adjusts to the use of a cane; and ultimately, how well a traveler he will be, depends greatly upon his experiences, and how well he uses his remaining vision or hearing in conjunction with his other senses.

The adjustment to the cane is very important to the deaf-blind individual. Initially, many deaf-blind people are afraid; they do not trust the instructor and the cane. They feel it will not give them all the information they need to know. They would rather touch things or slide their foot in front of them, than rely on the cane. This makes the type of cane used very important. At the Helen Keller National Center we use the long, white, fiberglass cane with a metal tip. We feel that this cane vibrates better and gives back more and better information.

The length of the cane is also very important. The hearing-blind use a cane that is measured to their elbow. At the Helen Keller National Center, we use a longer cane that is measured to the underarm. We feel that because of the loss of both sight and hearing, the deaf-blind need the extra length to give them more time to react to situations.

The cause of deaf-blindness makes a big difference in how we present our program. Is the blindness caused by Usher's Syndrome, Rubella, or is

the person the victim of spinal meningitis? Each type is treated differently. The Usher's Syndrome individual must be prepared for eventual blindness; the Rubella individual, if he has sight, is usually stable and may not need a cane; and the totally deaf-blind must learn to deal with the cane.

Is the individual congenitally or adventitiously deaf? When was the onset of deafness? Many people are unaware that even a mild hearing loss can cause harm to the balance mechanism in the ear, causing the individual difficulty in walking straight.

The experiences of the individual are very important in how well the person will do in mobility. Did he ever have a bad fall; did he travel before losing his sight; or did he sit at home? Where did he live; and what types of public transportation were available in his area? The mobility instructor must be aware of all of this in order for him to tailor the program to the needs of the individual. You do not want to teach an individual how to use the subways if he comes from an area where there are no subways, because this would be irrelevant to this deaf-blind person.

If the deaf-blind person has never been out of his house for many years, he is very likely to be afraid of the elements: the wind, rain and snow. He will be afraid to go out in these conditions, and will stiffen up and become rigid and this will affect his walking with a cane.

How the deaf-blind person was educated; whether as a blind person or as a deaf person, will affect how the person will communicate with the general public.

How the deaf-blind person communicates with the general public is the greatest difference between mobility for the blind and for the deaf-blind. The blind individual by and large can speak so that he can get his needs across easily to the general public.

Most deaf-blind persons cannot speak. If they can speak, many times the general public has difficulty understanding them, so another means of communication has to be used along with speech.

We use any means of communication the person may have. If he can write, he writes notes; if he can speak, he speaks. He can use gestures and draw pictures. We use any means the person has to get his needs across to the general public.

Mostly we use a series of printed cards which the deaf-blind individual uses to communicate with the general public. If, for example, the person needs help to cross the street, he is taught how to stand at the corner and get help. The cards read: I AM DEAF-BLIND. PLEASE HELP ME ACROSS THE STREET. TAP ME IF YOU UNDERSTAND. If the deaf-blind person reads Braille, the statement is brailled underneath the print, so that he will know what is written on the card. A long trip may entail up to twenty cards. Each is marked so that the deaf-blind person knows what card he is using.

How the general public communicates with the deaf-blind person is the real problem. The general public generally shies away from communicating with the deaf-blind because they do not know how, or are just afraid.

This puts the burden of initiating communication on the deaf-blind person. Therefore, the deaf-blind person must act and look as normal as possible. He must be well groomed and nicely dressed. He has to be courteous at all times, so that the general public will be less afraid of the deaf-blind.

To communicate with the deaf-blind, the general public can use a Tellatouch, an alphabet plate, write notes, or Tadoma. However, the best and easiest for the general public is print-on-palm.

Print-on-palm is the method we recommend because it is the most universal of all the methods. Everyone knows the letters of the alphabet, and all the person has to do to communicate is to print the letters in the palm of the deaf-blind.

When a deaf-blind person goes to the store, he shows the clerk a card which tells the clerk what he needs. Then the clerk prints into the palm of the deaf-blind person's hand the information he needs to know and the price.

There have been many inquiries about the use of the dog and other travel aids for deaf-blind mobility.

There is work being done to convert electronic travel aids designed for the blind for use with the deaf-blind. At present they are being tested and are not readily available.

It should be stated that these travel aids are just that - travel aids. They are not a substitute for mobility training, and in fact, to use these devices properly, the individual must have a solid background in mobility.

The use of the dog for deaf-blind mobility is just now being seriously considered. There are, however, many problems to solve and attitudes to change before this can be a reality.

The major problem is that many of the guide-dog schools will not accept deaf-blind students. They feel to be fully able to control the dog, a person must have hearing. Though the dog is trained to stop when he senses danger, to be safe and effective, the guide dog and master must work together.

Hopefully, in the future, the guide dog schools will change and start to accept deaf-blind students. The first places we may see their use is

in rural areas, where there are fewer traffic problems, and the deaf-blind person will be relatively safe from unexpected dangers.

As you can see, mobility for the deaf-blind adult is not a simple task. It is a complex set of interactions that depend on many factors. However, the most important factor is the motivation of the deaf-blind person. The more motivated the deaf-blind person is, the better an independent traveler he will be. He will be free.

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